



Deer Creek Pilot

Guiding the South Delta for 126 Years

Dedicated to the principle that the truth is the strongest argument.

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Rolling Fork, Mississippi

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50 Cents

Yazoo Pump: Protecting people or political pork?

RAY MOSBY
Editor

Editor's Note: This is the first of a four-part series examining the roles of Sharkey and Issaquena counties within the context of the South Delta's most controversial flood control project.

ROLLING FORK—For both the degree of passion or the amount of rhetorical excess surrounding any issue, it's hard to beat the Yazoo Backwater Pump project. Those who favor the project see it as the holy grail of flood control in the Mississippi Valley, the completion of a promise made by the United States government to South Delta residents more than 80 years ago. Those who oppose it see it as the worst kind of political pork barrel project, horribly damaging to the environment and justified by faulty data.

When it comes to the public debate over the Yazoo Pump, there is precious little middle ground, as proponents and opponents alike appear determined to out-think each other not only politically, but in the court of public opinion through passionate public pronouncements and debating letters to the editor or newspaper editorial pages.

Championing the project are the Vicksburg District, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, its local sponsor, the Mississippi Levee Board, Delta Council, the state's congressional delegation, local governments and the editorial boards of several Delta newspapers. Opposing it are a number of government agencies, most private environmental, conservation and taxpayer watchdog groups, and the editorial boards of not only the state's largest newspaper, but those of the nationally influential New York Times and Washington Post.

As the volume of the debate rises, so too seemingly does the level of rhetoric employed by both sides—to a point that the objective observer might be inclined to discount much, if not all of it. So when does the wheel of fact separate from the cliff of hyperbole, at least as far as the twin counties are concerned? On which side does the truth lie, or is this innocence, as in so many others, is that truth to be found somewhere between the conflicting agendas of the respective arguments?

In that Sharkey and Issaquena counties represent the eye of the pump project hurricane, the Deer Creek Pilot has conducted an independent review of the best data available as it relates to the twin counties—the Corps of Engineers' preliminary report in support of the project, federal Flood Insurance Program documents, elevation maps, personal interviews, census information and the land rolls of both Sharkey and Issaquena counties. The results of this investigation point both an enlightening and sometimes surprising picture.

BACKGROUND

Originally authorized by Congress in 1941, the Yazoo Backwater Pump Project, part of the United States Mississippi River and Tributaries Project, is intended to alleviate backwater flooding in the "hump" of Mississippi's South Delta—primarily Sharkey and Issaquena counties, which represent more than half of the area the pump would protect.

As currently envisioned by the Corps of Engineers, the project provides for the construction of a 14,000 cubic-foot-per-second pumping plant (one of the largest, if not the largest in the world) at the site of the Steele Bayou water control structure in southern Issaquena County, along with the acquisition of 62,500 acres of conservation easements from willing sellers.

As water levels on the Mississippi River rise, existing flood control gates are closed to keep river waters from flowing "back" into the South Delta, and spilling over the low-lying lands in the twin counties. This results in a "closed system" for the

South Delta, where not only water from other drainage outlets to the north, but any rain which falls, ponds here and results in backwater flooding of various degrees in most years. The Corps calculates that 231,457 cleared acres in the South Delta floods on an annual basis, although that statistic, like virtually all utilized in support of the project, is questioned by its opponents.

The Yazoo Pump would evacuate the excess internal water back into the main Mississippi River channel. The pump would be utilized only for such backwater flooding events and would not be effective for, or even utilized against headwater flooding down the Mississippi.

Under the Corps' currently proposed plan, the pump would become operational when backwater levels reached 87 feet National Geodetic Vertical Datum (NGVD).

"We like to say that it (the pump operation) would take four to five and one-half feet off any given flood," Mississippi Levee Board chief engineer Jim Winklesky said. "If you had three feet of water in your house in 1973, you wouldn't have any with the pump."

Such a pump would not be cheap—either to build or to operate. In its preliminary project report released in 2000 (a final version is reported to be in the works), the Corps set the cost of the pump at \$181 million and said it would cost an additional \$1 million per year to maintain and operate over its 50-year projected span of use. Based on current population figures, that would translate into a little more than \$23,000 for each man, woman and child in Sharkey and Issaquena counties.

But the Corps calculates that its 925,901-acre project area—52 percent of which it says is Sharkey and Issaquena counties—would receive overall first cost benefits of \$1.67 for every \$1 expended. In what is a key component, both of the plan and of the controversy surrounding it, the Corps calculates both the geographic area which the pump would protect and the benefits which would accrue from its utilization based on the 100-year flood—a flood event of such magnitude and duration that it would occur, on average, only once in every hundred years.

In that a pump with a 50-year life span is designed to protect against a 100-year flood, there is, in essence, a \$231 million bet on the national table that 100-year water levels will go south before the pump does.

WHERE DOES IT STAND NOW?

Staunch proponents of the project, Mississippi's two U.S. senators, Trent Lott and Trent Lott, last month succeeded in including language which would appear to provide for virtually perpetual funding for the Yazoo Pump into an omnibus federal spending bill, then hear back an effort led by Arkansas Sen. John McCain—a vocal critic of pork barrel spending—to remove it.

Informed sources tell the Deer Creek Pilot that action authorized the Bush White House, which had included only \$250,000 for continued study of the pump project, in its budget submitted to Congress. That disposition was demonstrated when the administration's Office of Management and Budget modified the pump project as a potential budget-buster.

However, last Tuesday Senate and House conferees passed their political muscles and reached agreement on the omnibus spending bill, which includes \$10 million in spending for the pump project in Fiscal 2003. The only immediate hurdle remaining to the project's advancement would appear to lie within the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, which is on record as opposing the pump and which by law must pass environmental scrutiny upon it.

NEXT WEEK: Who are the people here the pump would protect?





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Yazoo Pump: Whose homes here are flooding?

RAY MOSBY & NATALIE PERKINS

Editor's Note: This is the second in a four-part series examining the roles of Sharkey and Issaquena counties within the context of the South Delta's most controversial flood control project.

"Year after year, these people who live in this area are threatened with floods, as are their homes and businesses and hospitals. It's a very dangerous situation."—U.S. Sen. Trent Lott (R-Miss.) on the floor of the U.S. Senate during a debate on funding for the Yazoo Backwater Pump, Jan. 23, 2003.

ROLLING FORK—Are people really seriously threatened, do they face danger on a regular basis from backwater flooding?

Somewhere, perhaps, but not Sharkey and Issaquena counties. That's the finding of an investigation by the Deer Creek Pilot of the lowest-lying areas of the two counties, and that's the admission of one of the Yazoo Backwater Pump Project's most vocal and vocal proponents.

For many years, the Yazoo Backwater Pump Project has been argued and advanced as an agricultural enhancement one. But recently that changed—most notably in respective speeches by Mississippi's two U.S. senators trying to best back an attempt to approve project funding from the federal budget. The Corps of Engineers' plan to build a 14,000 cubic-foot-per-second pumping plant in southern Issaquena County has now apparently morphed into an effort to protect South Delta homes from flooding. "The pump actually will protect 1,000 homes. I think the most important thing is the human side of this. Year after year—and it is almost every year that people have water in their homes," Lott said.

Similarly, in a half-page advertisement in The Clarion-Ledger Feb. 3, the Mississippi Levee Board lauded the project as one to "keep a child safe from the horrors of floodwaters," and said it would "solve many of the problems that families who inhabit over 1,000 homes in the area face during high water events."

So when are these threatened South Delta and their 1,000 regularly flooding homes?

The Deer Creek Pilot examined the tax rolls of the two counties—270,201.58 acres, lying south of a line just beneath the southern town limits of Cary—the local land most frequently susceptible to routine backwater flooding events. (See graphic on Page 2.) That area also represents a significant portion of the two-year frequency flood plain, where the Vicksburg District, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has concluded only one "structure" is subject to flooding. (Within the Cary area limits the Corps says only two houses would be affected by a 100-year flood.)

The tax rolls for that area indicate 196 occupied flood residential dwellings, 128 of which are owner-occupied. These totals do not include mobile homes, which, by definition, can be more easily moved in the event of perpetual flooding.

According to The Statistics Institute of Government, at Mississippi State University, which served as the metering consultant for the two counties after the 2000 Census, approximately 425-450 men, women and children are currently residing in Sharkey and Issaquena counties south of the Cary line—or about 2.4 individuals per occupied flood dwelling.

So how many of them flood

on any kind of recurring basis?

According to Mississippi Emergency Management Agency records:

• In the 34-year period from 1978-2002, 151 federal flood insurance program losses were reported in Sharkey County—an average of 4.29 per year.

• In the 34-year period from 1978-2002, 645 federal flood insurance program losses were reported in Issaquena County—an average of 26.8 per year.

The state agency records do not reflect how many of those reported losses were to homes.

And while not all residents in the area can be assumed to participate in the flood insurance program, the statistically average year of 37.47 flood insurance claims in the lowest area of the two counties making up more than half of the Corps pump project area would hardly seem to support the claim of up to 1,000 homes flooding every year.

But what about first-hand accounts? Personal anecdotal evidence?

Both Lott and U.S. Sen. Thad Cochran (R-Miss.) in their Jan. 23 Senate speeches, referenced a week earlier visit from a "delegation" of five African-American South Delta residents, led by Ruby Johnson of Cary, which supported the pump.

Johnson, along with Clifford Porter of Hattiesburg, serves as co-chairman of the South Delta Flood Control Committee, a local area pro-pump group organized by two of the project's strongest proponents, the Delta Council and the Mississippi Levee Board.

"They told us stories about having to put their children in boats to take them to school when the water is rising. They told us of feeding snakes, which find their way into their homes after the water recedes," Lott told his fellow senators.

But how contemporary are those stories?

Contacted Feb. 18 at her home, located on high ground above Deer Creek in Cary, Johnson said she is personally unaware of any Sharkey or Issaquena county family which actually must deal with floodwaters in its home today.

"To be honest with you," Johnson said, "I know of one or two who have to leave because of the water, but I can't actually say of anyone who gets water in their house. When the water comes up to the houses, they move out. I don't know of one that gets water in their home."

Johnson, who said she moved back to Sharkey County from Chicago in 1995, said the last, "heard stories from my family about how bad it used to be."

When asked if she had learned through her South Delta Flood Control Committee role of occupied homes flooding within the last 20 years—since the completion of the Backwater Levee in 1980—Johnson said, "that project helped a lot. It doesn't get as bad."

Echoing that evaluation was Linda Winslow, the U.S. Postal Service rural mail carrier, whose route has been the lower part of Sharkey and Issaquena counties for the past 18 years. Winslow said that while some dwellings on her twin-county rural mail route used to be periodically affected by backwater flooding, she knows of no one which is today.

Winslow said the homes which in previous years were subject to flooding, "in the reality had been," but that both are "vacant today."

There used to be one

Not so much any more

The sights of South Delta homes flooded and others threatened, like these during the flood of 1973, were once common. However, the construction of water control structures and the completion of the Backwater Levee in 1980 have greatly reduced residential flooding here.

—Pilot file photos



trailer," to rural Issaquena County which Winslow said took on water during bad backwater flooding years, but that its owner, "moved it across the road where it is higher, and it doesn't flood now."

There are, of course, a number of structures—mostly recreational club houses and cabins, which are located on the river side of the Mainline Miss. River Levee on or near lakes Abbeville and Choctaw, and which are subject to high water events. However, is that the Yazoo Pump would evacuate backwater from the land side of the levee, back over it to the river side, it is difficult to see how its operation would provide flood protection to any structure on the west side of the levee.

The Corps of Engineers' 2000 preliminary project report on the Yazoo Backwater Pump says it would provide flood protection in about 1,600 "structures," 1,487 of which it identifies as houses, from a 100-year flood frequency event in the Mississippi counties of Sharkey, Issaquena, Yazoo, Washington and Humphreys, and Madison Parish, La.

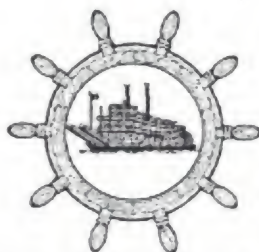
But if, as is currently being advanced, there are 1,000 homes which the pump would protect from virtually annual flooding events, not many of them are apparently located within the lowest of the low areas—the hole at the bottom of the South Delta bathtub—which is two counties makes up 52 percent of the geographic area the pump would protect.



On Jan. 23, the U.S. Senate voted 67-30 to approve \$10 million in funding for the Yazoo Backwater Pump Project. How many of its mem-

bers, in so doing, believed they were protecting women and children from the dangers of constant flooding in Sharkey and Issaquena counties?

Next week: Who owns the land in the pump?



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Yazoo Pump: Is it really a farm project?

RAY MORRY & NATALIE PERKINS

Editor's Note: This is the third of a four-part series examining the roles of Sharkey and Issaquena counties within the context of the South Delta's most controversial flood control project.

"The pumps are specifically designed to drain wetlands so that large landowners can increase agricultural production on marginal lands." —U.S. Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) on the floor of the U.S. Senate, Jan. 23, 2003.

"The purpose of this project is not to create new agricultural opportunities in this part of the Mississippi Delta." —U.S. Sen. Thad Cochran (R-Miss.) on the floor of the U.S. Senate, Jan. 23, 2003.

ROLLING FORK—So is the Yazoo Backwater Pump, at its heart, a project primarily designed to enhance agricultural production or not?

Economists at the Vicksburg District, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers apparently believe it is, because without agriculture, the proposed project could not come close to being economically justified by government standards. In a draft report on the project, released in 2000, the Corps concluded that building a 14,000 cubic-feet-per-second pumping plant in southern Issaquena County would produce combined flood control benefits of \$21.5 million per year—of which a whopping \$17.1 million (80 percent) are either directly agricultural or agriculture-related—to offset the pump's \$181 million price tag and 50-year maintenance and operation costs.

So which lands in Sharkey and Issaquena counties—which lands making up the so-called "sump" of the South Delta, most frequently suffering the effects of backwater flooding—would receive the most direct benefits from the pump?

The most eye-catching result of an examination of the tax rolls of the two counties is that the vast majority of the South Delta's lowest lying lands, those beneath a levee just south of Cary, are not owned by South Deltaans.

Of the 270,000 acres which make up much of the twin-county "two-year flood frequency plain," 68 percent are owned either by the government or someone



Lots of trees

The United States government is the largest landowner in southern Sharkey and Issaquena counties and much of that land, along with several large private holdings, is forested.

—Photo courtesy U.S. Forest Service

landlords.

In Sharkey County, more than a third (30 percent) of all the acres south of the Cary line are government owned, and in Issaquena County, more than half (58 percent) of those acres are under the ownership of those who live elsewhere and use the land for either forestry, conservation or recreation-related purposes.

Issaquena County land in the sump seems to be particularly attractive to out of county buyers. More than 15,000 acres can be identified specifically as used for hunting purposes, and at one point on the county tax rolls, 66 consecutive parcels of land, ranging in size from 20 acres to one acre, are owned by absentee landlords who apparently utilize it almost solely for recreation.

In both South Delta counties a considerable number of acres, the majority of which are among their lowest-lying lands, have been enrolled in a pair of government programs—the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) and the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP), which are designed to encourage conservation practices on marginal agricultural lands. Farm Service Agency records show that in Sharkey and Issaquena counties, 6,016.2 acres are currently under government CRP contracts, while National Resource Conservation Service records indicate that 20,217 acres in the two counties have been enrolled in WRP.

So who actually owns the sump?

The largest landowner in the twin counties, south of the Cary line is the United States government, which owns 36,824.8 acres, much of it represented by the Delta National Forest.

Among privately held property, the forestry giant Anderson-Tully, with 35,401 acres, is the largest landowner in the two counties, followed by two other conservation holdings, Delta Wildlife and Forestry with 21,037 acres and Van Development with 10,084 acres, respectively.

In all, 18 companies, individuals or combined family holdings make up 54 percent of all the privately owned land in both counties south of Cary.

In addition to the three basic, largely forested blocks of property, the others are Moore family holdings, Dent Plantation, Carter family holdings, Leslie Willis, Klans family holdings, O.J. Sharpe, Adam family holdings, Ernest Thomas, Heigle family holdings, Arwood Partners, Beaming Enterprises, Lazendroff family holdings, Powers and Company, McPherson family holdings, and Darden family holdings.

The 18 largest landowners combine for the ownership of 115,456.2 acres of land in southern Sharkey and Issaquena counties.

In the economic analysis section of its Project Report, the Corps related experiences both with its evaluation of current land use

and its prediction that those patterns would remain unchanged over time, whether the pump was built or not.

"Future land use in the Yazoo Backwater area (flood plain without or with implementation of water resources improvements is expected to parallel that of current use," the report's economic analysis says. "Existing trends toward reliance on manufacturing and the lesser importance of agriculture are expected to continue."

That's clearly not the case

in Sharkey and Issaquena counties, where very little manufacturing activity now exists in the wake of factory closings within the last decade, and the two-county economy is today almost entirely agriculture-dominated.

But it is indeed in the area of increased agricultural production that the Corps concludes the South Delta will achieve its greatest benefits from the pump. Although it has been criticized for calculating agriculture benefits using 1992 and 1994 data, the Corps says the pump will produce increased crop yields for virtually every South Delta crop. Cotton yields are predicted to rise as much as 71 pounds per acre, depending on land quality, and soybean yields are predicted to rise 3.5 bushels per acre.

With the pump in place, the Corps also says that farm land values would increase. Its report estimates that every acre of cleared land will rise in value from \$23.61 to \$31.08 per acre, depending on quality.

However, in what some say undermines the credibility of the document, the same Corps economic analysis which reached these conclusions, also advanced some others which would seem to fly in the face of contemporary reality in Sharkey and Issaquena counties.

The Corps report predicts that the respective populations of South Delta counties will increase over the 50-year life of the pump, despite the fact that most of those county populations

have been decreasing steadily since World War II. In the 50-year span between 1940-1990, the combined populations of Sharkey and Issaquena counties decreased by more than 54 percent.

The total population of the twin counties today stands at 8,643.

Similarly, the report predicts that the South Delta civilian labor force will die over the next 50 years, even though the work force in the twin counties decreased 18 percent from 1980-1990, and like the larger population, has been decreasing progressively since.

Like so much else, the Yazoo Backwater Pump Project is apparently subject to the often fickle eyes of its beholders.

In the Yazoo pump as all-in-one tonic for the social and economic ills of the South Delta, one which the Mississippi Levee Board advertises as "hard it, and industries and businesses will come?" Or is it rather what Virginia Tech professor Leonard Shabman describes as, "formulated principally to protect the owners of farm land from predictable and minor seasonal flooding?"

Like the "Old Man River" of song, whose rising waters ultimately lie at its origins, the great debate that began 60 years ago in the South Delta sump and today extends to the halls of Congress, "just keeps rolling along."

Next Week: Is the secret in the language?

Projected Population, Economic Base Study Area Yazoo Backwater Area, Mississippi

The Corps of Engineers predicts that populations in the South Delta would increase with completion of the pump project

Year	Projected Population (No.)	Ratio of Increase (%)
1996 (current year)	10,470	
2005 (EPD)*	10,481	1.00105
2006 (base year)†	10,520	1.00373
2015	10,867	1.03298
2025	11,150	1.02808
2035	11,434	1.02847
2045	11,591	1.01373
2055	11,828	1.02048

*EPD denotes estimated project completion data.

Base year denotes first full year that benefits will be realized after project completion.



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Yazoo Pump: Which names, numbers are correct?

RAY MOSBY & NATALIS PERKINS

"There are three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies and statistics." —Disraeli

ROLLING FORK — What's in a name? What's in a number? Perhaps a lot when it comes to the Yazoo Backwater Pump Project.

A never-released 1998 Mississippi State University study, using flooding data provided by the Vicksburg District, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, paints a significantly different picture of the project than the one the Corps put on display for public consumption two years later.

In May, 1998, the Stoneville-based advocacy group Delta Council commissioned MSU's Department of Agricultural Economics (along with the Miss. Department of Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks) to conduct a "multi-disciplinary study to document consequences of flooding in the South Delta and to evaluate a plan to manage wetlands and control floodwaters." At that time it was proposed that South Delta floodwaters be returned to drainage water levels in winter months, as well as provide a 14,000 cubic-foot-per-second pump to evacuate excess backwater above 85 feet in elevation in the spring.

"Almost all of the hydrologic data was provided us by the Corps," said MSU professor Dr. Stan R. Sparlock, who headed up the effort. MSU was asked only

to consider flooding to lands, not people or their homes, as is now being emphasized.

According to sources, a draft of the report was completed in December, 1998, but its findings were objected to by Delta Council officials, who ordered it quashed in early 1999. No final version of the report was ever released.

"I'd say that's about right," Sparlock said last week, when asked to verify the accounts.

Sparlock said that the Corps provided MSU professors with an intricately detailed hydrologic simulation model of historical backwater flooding. According to the MSU draft report, a copy of which was obtained by the Deer Creek Pilot, that model was "capable of estimating flood stages at two locations (the Steele Bayou and Little Sunflower water control structures) on a daily basis over the period 1943-1997."

The report also says that the Corps provided MSU with a valuable gauge for determining just which kinds of land are flooding. Referred to throughout the report as "Adjusted Cleared Land," or ACL, that statistic represents the number of acres of land "suitable for crop production as opposed to woodland, and adjusted to exclude land that is enrolled in any government conservation program" — in other words, actual cropland.

However, in its draft project report, on its web site and in its literature related to the project, the Corps does not signifi-

cantly utilize the real cropland statistic, opting instead for what is apparently a less precise one — "cleared land."

The Vicksburg District, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers did not respond to repeated requests made by the Deer Creek Pilot to answer a list of questions submitted last week related to information in the MSU study, to provide any clarification of terms, or to comment at all on this story.

However, the Corps' 2000 draft report — which stands as its official statement to the public on the project — maintains repeatedly that 231,000 acres of "cleared land floods on an average annual basis." But "cleared" acres apparently don't equal "adjusted cleared" acres. The MSU report, based on the 1998 Corps figures, and studying virtually the same area, concludes:

- At 85 foot elevation, less than 50,000 acres of real cropland exist;

- At 90 feet, there are less than 100,000 acres of real cropland;

- At 95 feet, there are less than 200,000 acres of real cropland.

Then, based on the maximum amount of cropland flooded in the spring, the MSU professors ranked each flood in the 54-year period:

- Severe (maximum flood stage 96.9 feet) — 8 years;

- Above Average (maximum flood stage 92.2 feet) — 11 years;

- Average (maximum flood

stage 89.5 feet) — 15 years;

- Below Average (maximum flood stage 86.8 feet) — 11 years;

- Mild (maximum flood stage 82.5 feet) — 9 years.

From that, the MSU report concluded that in the "average" year, only 77,433 acres of actual crop land floods (of which 90,000 would still flood even with a pump beginning operation at 87 feet).

Among the other key findings in the MSU report are:

- The Corps' simulation model of the study period with the prescribed pumps in place showed "in the most severe year (1973) the pumps had a relatively large impact on removing floodwaters from inundated ACL, but very large amounts of ACL remained under water on May 1."

- In slightly over one-half of those years, however, the floodwaters had receded below 81 feet by May 1 without the pumps, and "this percentage did not change with the pump in operation."

- Delta Council also provided MSU with a list of favored South Delta farmers who were interviewed to obtain "first-hand opinions" for the study. One of those producers, Clifton Porter of Pitar, who serves as co-chairman of the South Delta Flood Control Committee and who has been portrayed in numerous print and television ads as a victim of backwater flooding, is featured in the study as reporting, "most of his cropland in Issaquena County is at an elevation of 95 feet, and is not affected by minor floods."

- The earlier-advanced plan to hold water at an 80-foot elevation during winter months was "ineffective" in most years.

In the sections of the MSU report prepared by Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks personnel, there are warnings that additional studies on the South Delta ecosystem should take place, due to potential consequences of a pumping operation:

- "It is possible that the implementation of a radically different hydrologic regime could influence every plant and animal resource within the area."

- "Flood pulses are natural and fundamentally important to maintaining dynamic, diverse, and productive riverine floodplain ecosystems. Further reduction in the dynamic hydrologies of river floodplain ecosystems may not be wise stewardship."

Sparlock said that he still supports the findings in his study of the backwater uses and the proposed pumping project. He

admitted he had felt "frustrated" that no final version was ever released but says that he still provides copies of the existing draft upon request.

"Even with the pumps, people (in the South Delta) are going to get some pretty good floods," the MSU professor said. "These things are going to cost an awful lot and they are not going to work like the people think they are."

Despite the fact that it utilized Corps data, no reference is made to the MSU study within

the Vicksburg District's official report on the project, and it is not listed among the research noted as "previous reports and studies that are pertinent to the Yazoo Backwater Project."

What does investigation show?

ROLLING FORK — So what has a weekly newspaper's four-week fact finding mission into the confusing and often contradictory mazes of claims and counter-claims about the Yazoo Backwater Project revealed? What began with questions, some of which may have been answered, still ends with yet more questions.

Mississippi's two United States Senators told their fellow lawmakers earlier this year that the project which has come to be known locally as simply "the pumps," is really about protecting people from flooding to their homes on a regular basis. The Deer Creek Pilot's investigation discovered that's not accurate, at least as far as Sharikey and Issaquena counties are concerned. The Corps of Engineers' report on the project doesn't make such a claim, so from where did the senators get their incorrect information? Perhaps more significantly, why have those involved with the project who know better not chosen to publicly correct it?

At least locally relative to that, The South Delta Flood Control Committee, a creation of the Delta Council and the Mississippi Lower Board, would appear to have a black eye in the wake of the investigation.

One of its co-chairmen has admitted that homes have not been flooded regularly after years of relating colorful accounts of flooding, while the other co-chairman, who has been recently portrayed as the virtual poster boy for the flood-plagued South Delta farmer, told Mississippi State University professors five years ago that his land doesn't flood.

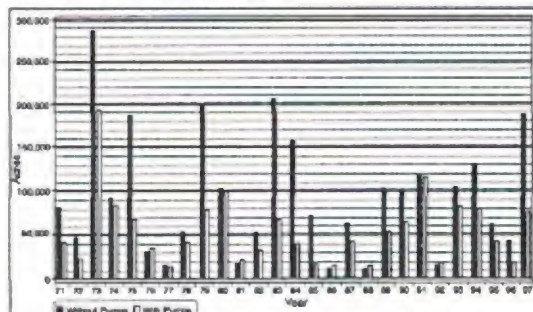
Will there be any fallout from that, or will the South Delta mythology which has grown up surrounding the "pumps" simply expand to include the kinds of tall tales an acronym to such folklore?

The Yazoo Backwater Project is publicly defended by its proponents against charges that it is primarily an agricultural enhancement one, designed to benefit a handful of large landowners. The newspaper investigation showed that 80 percent of the project benefits calculated by the Corps of Engineers are either directly agricultural or agriculture-related. If 40 percent of the project's benefits are agricultural, how can it not be primarily an agricultural project?

Finally an all new level of significance should now apparently be afforded to the word "adjusted." When applied to the purported number of acres of South Delta land which flood on an average annual basis, the word "adjusted" would appear to have enormous importance to the Vicksburg District, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. While the Corps has refused to answer any questions or provide any clarification of that subject, it appears that distinction could be the difference between 231,000 "cleared" acres of land flooding every year and 77,000 acres of actual cropland flooding every year.

Does "cleared land" not imply cropland to the average person? When they clearly had both, why would the Corps choose to use the term which is far less accurate and descriptive in its report to the American people, the most affected of whom reside in Sharikey and Issaquena counties? Why would the Corps, which is on the public's payroll, provide the seemingly better data for a study funded by a private organization?

Questions, breeding questions, birthing yet more questions. But with \$10 million just appropriated by Congress for the project and another \$12 million being requested for next year, who is even looking for their answers?



Source: Consolidated from data obtained by MSU from U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Vicksburg District

Estimated maximum adjusted cleared land flooded during the non-winter months, without and with 85-foot elevation pumps at Steele Bayou, Yazoo Backwater Area, 1971-1997